

# EULOGY

*IN COMMEMORATION OF THE DECEASED POETESS,*

MINNA KLEEGER,

PRONOUNCED IN THE TEMPLE OF THE CONGREGATION "MISHKAN  
ISRAEL," IN NEW HAVEN, ON THE 11TH OF JANUARY, 1879,

As a Tribute of his Love and Affection, by her Husband,

REV. DR. L. KLEEGER,

RABBI OF THE CONGREGATION.



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## AN ORATION.

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DEAR FRIENDS:

WHEN under the skillful hand of the master of the lute—at the very moment when every ear is strained to listen—the most delicate strings of the instrument slacken or break, so that it seems impossible to produce an harmonious impression, even then the artist—with his power—will still be able to draw forth the sweetest and most delicate tones from his defective instrument and awaken the noblest sentiments in the hearts of the listeners.

Should I to-day, my beloved friends, in addressing you, give expression only to the feelings of my heart, I fear that under the weight of my emotions my lips would fail to perform their proper function. For when I consider the loss of my dear wife, the crown and the ornament of my house; when I think of the mother, the faithful and affectionate guide of her children; when I think of the poetess, who by her literary activity worked beneficially far beyond the narrow limits of the household, who by her sweet and spirited verses delighted so many thousands of hearts and thus became a favorite of all those susceptible to poetic influences, but whose expressive eye and eloquent lips are now forever closed, I almost sink beneath the pressure of these recollections. I will, however, attempt in brief but faithful outlines to bring before your minds the image of the departed, although my heart is clouded with sadness. For I know, the artist who paints a tear must not weep, the hand which would portray passion must not tremble.

It is now just twenty years ago, on a cold and stormy winter day, when the ground was covered with snow and ice and the sky was overcast, that with heart more gloomy than

the external world and with my soul wrapped in pain and sorrow, I had just committed to the cold bosom of the earth the remains of my mother, who had long been a patient sufferer. Winter glided away, spring and summer came and went, and soon again snow and ice enveloped the earth. In the midst of the winter my fate led me to Elmsborn, a little town in Holstein, where I first saw her, who was later to be the happiness and the blessing of my life. She was the daughter of Dr. Cohen, a highly esteemed physician, and was born July 21st, 1841. Her natural talents displayed themselves early, and under the guidance of her liberally educated father she received a careful intellectual training. At my first interview with her, then a maiden of eighteen years, I was surprised and delighted at the development precocious of her mind and heart. The productions of German, French and English poets and thinkers, and above all, purely scientific works, were her dearest companions. Upon the wall of her modest study I saw a programme of studies and employments which she followed with rigorous accuracy and which assigned to every hour of the day, from early morning, its definite task. Household duties were not overlooked, but trifling and frivolity found no place. How rare among those of her years and sex is such recognition of the value of time and of the earnestness of life! I was carried away by the devotedness of such a life, and my heart was given to her wholly. She often expressed to me her regret that in consequence of her sex the doors were closed to higher academic culture and the practical application of knowledge. Almost from her childhood she complained of the subordinate position which tradition and custom had assigned to woman. Upon her thirteenth birthday and the following Sabbath she shed bitter tears that she was not, like Jewish boys of her own age, entitled to take part in the public reading of the law, and by this rite be solemnly consecrated to the cause of Israel. Especially offensive to her was the formula designed for women in the old ritual: "God be praised that he has created me according to his will." Such a sentiment she was unwilling to utter. In one of her earliest poems, entitled "After God's Will," she says:

„Und tropig hob ich zu preisen an,  
Daß ich nicht geworden ein stolzer Mann.“

In July of the year 1862, a year after I had become the minister of the Jewish Congregation of Elberfeld, the young poetess accompanied me as my spouse to my home in the charming Wupperthal. Here, in the society of congenial women and distinguished men, like the poet Rittershaus, whose admiration and friendship she at once won, her poetical talents were developed to their fullest bloom. Up to this time her poetry had been confined chiefly to Jewish topics, and her verses had found wide circulation and recognition in Jewish periodicals. Rittershaus, in a poem dedicated to her, thus recognizes her mission as a poet:

„Nicht einem Volk nur, einem einz'gem Stamme,  
Entzünd' Deines Geistes Lieberflamme!  
Des Dichters Schaffen soll wie Sonnenschein  
Für alle Welt ein Gottessegn sein!“

From this time on, her heart and her poems belonged no longer to Israel alone but to humanity. The high tax which in Prussia was imposed on salt, and which was especially onerous to the poor, gave rise to her poem, “Das Lied vom Salz,” which was subsequently published in the Leipzig *Gartenlaube*, and was not without effect in influential circles. When soon after its composition Rittershaus attended a convention of poets and authors at Frankfort-on-the-Main, where new literary works were read and discussed, mention was made of Jewish authors, and opinions were expressed that the Jews were lacking in patriotism and in interest for the weal and the woe of the people, and that Jewish authors did not understand how to give effective utterance to the complaints of the oppressed people. Rittershaus thereupon read to the assembly the recently written and not yet published poem. The piece was pronounced to be a poetic gem. Opinions were unanimous in regard to the touching and yet bold language in the cause of the suffering people. There was great curiosity to learn who was able to give such patriotic and such powerful expression to the unspoken complaint of the burdened people. Rittershaus then announced the name of the not yet widely known author, and said: “The one who thus feels and writes is a Jewess.”

In the years 1870 and 1871, when the Franco-German war so deeply stirred the minds of the people even in this country, the poetess touched the strings of her lyre and her spirited verses resounded in the hearts of many loyal Germans, prompting them to active assistance.

The vindictive accusations of Richard Wagner and Professor Billroth against the Jews she met in a widely circulated paper, with a few bristling articles. Her poetical effusions, as well as her bold and vigorous defence of her co-religionists, were acknowledged by many letters of appreciation from all quarters, even from the other side of the ocean. The Crown-Prince of Prussia, the Chancellor Bismarck, Eduard Lasker, and a great many scholars and authors have often expressed their admiration in letters of thanks. As a genuine and faithful Jewess she endeavored to combat attacks against her people where she was likely to meet their opponents. Hence it is, that we find her name less in Jewish papers than in those read by all classes of society.

As a God-inspired poetess she was preëminently able to portray, in the most tender manner, circumstances affecting deeply the emotions. And what genuine and childlike sentiments do her religious hymns breathe, published in modern Israelitish prayer books in the old and new world, hymns wherein the modern religious reform finds expression in its full fervor. And just because they were felt so deeply, these hymns inspire prayerful souls with spontaneous devotion.

That the departed was a poetess by the grace of God, whose lyric effusions bear the stamp of genuine poetry, has been often acknowledged by all critics; her genius found the hearty recognition and encouragement of all those who understood how to appreciate the pure gems of her muse. An appreciative public have gratefully accepted every gift offered by her genius. And what ovations were brought her in those narrower circles wherein she moved, from all those who enjoyed her personal society? *Love, admiration and enthusiastic veneration* were bestowed upon her in large measure. And how worthy was she of this love and admiration! For in the crown she wore, the brightest pearls were unquestionably humility and modesty, virtues by which she won irresistibly the hearts of all.

The poor never feel themselves perfectly at home in the society of the rich, the distance between them is too great, and even when the rich avoid all trace of ostentation the medium for a mutual, pleasant intercourse is still wanting, for the soul-life of each is so vastly different. So between intellectual wealth and poverty there is an unbridged gulf; the cultured do not feel at ease in the society of the uncultured, and the educated will seem unsympathetic in less educated circles. Still more when a woman has received a superior education, which raises her in intellectual attainment far above the majority of her sex, she is likely to abuse her superiority by arrogance and to become an object of derision.

How different was it with the departed in the splendor of her noble gifts of soul and heart. Her scholarly attainments were to her not foreign elements, acquired painfully. The jewel gleaming with light does not get its splendor and beauty from without, but its value is intrinsic. The artist can not enhance its splendor by the addition of any foreign substance. Thus the poetess appeared quite at an early age in the full splendor of her rare genius. She did not write because and when she desired it, but because she *must*. When the poetic, that is, the prophetic, spirit prompted her, she could not resist, and she was carried away in the flight of her thoughts. As the ancient prophets of Israel, prompted by the spirit of God, were forced to prophesy, thus the modern prophetess who says in her "Dichterweihe,"

„Die Dichter sind die Seher unsrer Zeit,“

could not withstand the power that prompted her and she was compelled to create. Then it was not some onerous task she performed; thoughts and language gushed forth in melodious rhythmic unison. As the bud springs from the twig, as the flower noiselessly unfolds from the bud as soon as the mild spring sky begins to spread its blue canopy, so the flower of her genius appeared noiselessly in seasons of inspiration. Sometimes it happened that her poetical effusions took quite a different direction from what was assigned to them in her less inspired moments.

With that gracefulness inborn in noble women, the poetess understood how to move in all circles. Her modesty did not claim any attention to her talents. In social gatherings intended for light amusements she would have never attempted to introduce topics of a purely intellectual nature. She at once became familiar with the tone and the degree of education wherein she found herself, and then understood how to strike the proper key note. In her conversation she avoided carefully even the show of her superior education. She set an example to her sex of a noble simplicity in her appearance; she despised luxury and still she was admired in her simple and tasteful elegance and the affability and gentleness of her nature. In her intercourse with the learned she could readily ascend the highest pinnacle of thought and just as easily descend, and in merry circles she could take hearty part in the joyous sallies of her friends.

In social circles where ladies met to amuse themselves, or to make display, or to be admired, she was, without seeking for it, the center of admiration. Jealousy and vanity were silent in her presence, all in quiet accord subordinated themselves to her superior understanding and intellect. And when visitors from a distance were to be entertained and honored, though the festive board was groaning under the most delicious sweets, still the welcome greeting of the poetess was the most enjoyable feature. Her eloquent words gave grace to the festive occasion.

When the poetess thus manifested herself to the world at large, delighting the minds and hearts of so many thousands, what must she then have been to her family? In the midst of her children there the fulness of her poetical soul unfolded itself in all its sweetness. How joyous did her soul-beaming eye appear when she related to her children the legends of classical antiquity, or when a biblical hero was the topic of her conversation, to ennoble the hearts of her darlings. Yet her example itself was poetical. Besides her literary occupations and the careful education of her children she did not neglect the trifling small home duties, and every thing she undertook breathed the spirit of poetry. The motherless children do not yet realize the loss they have experienced so early in the morning of their lives.

And when I now but for a moment remember the dear departed, what she has been to me, when I think of the now forever sundered bond of the soul, how does my heart tremble, how lonely and dreary appears to me the world, how void is life! What I felt and thought, each new idea that thrilled my soul and that was intended to be uttered at the sacred desk, from her approval and consent received its sanction. And even now, when she herself is the subject of my discourse, it seems as if I must consult with her, must meditate with her, must ask her genial advice, whether my tribute to her worth is adequate to her virtues and talents. Alas! her lovely features have vanished, her gentle and suggestive words are no longer heard!

The tears that were shed at her bier when we with solemn dirges laid away her mortal remains in the cold earth, the lamentations which resounded far and wide, the manifestations of sorrow and grief in the public press, all these are loud and eloquent testimonies of the love and admiration rendered her in life, and of the sorrow produced by her death. Thanks be unto you, my beloved, for your warm and heartfelt sympathy for me and mine in these hard and trying hours of affliction. Thanks for the affectionate consideration which you exhibited towards the departed in the days of her suffering. How gladdening was your love! Each tribute of flowers, each kind attention calculated to render her forgetful of her suffering, awakened in her the sincerest gratitude.

To you also, my worthy friends, both men and women, in the far west where we resided more than ten years, to you I give my thanks for the love and self-sacrificing fidelity which you displayed to my beloved wife while living. Your sympathy and love have been pure and noble up to her death. Not one of all the personal friends of the departed is liable to the reproach of having ever wounded or offended her. On the contrary, from many loving hearts, up to the moment of her departure from her former home, she received unmistakable tokens of love and faithful devotion. There was, however, one person, whose sacred vocation inspired her with trust, to whom in a time of severe trouble she had occasion to make an appeal.



Yet he proved faithless to humanity and to every noble sentiment, showing himself wholly unworthy of her confidence at a time when the shadows of approaching death were already encompassing her. It was a trying, painful period; the formerly so cheerful spirit of our household had departed, and anxiety for the future had darkened our horizon.

It was in the power of this one person to dispel the clouds which hung over us and to give a favorable turn to our destiny. To him, therefore, she had appealed, but the appeal of the poetess remained unanswered and unheeded. Avarice and ambition triumphed. She whose faith in the nobility of human nature had never before been shaken, now found herself bitterly undeceived and remained silent. But the action of the man met from another quarter in an open and manly way with fitting rebuke. This, however, aroused for a while the passion of other parties and our position seemed to become yet more endangered. Then the deeply wounded poetess renounced her inborn, noble pride, and overlooking the discourtesy she had met with, made a new but much more moderate appeal to the very man who had been deaf to her former one. Since neither avarice nor ambition were to be overcome and at most only an ignoble feeling of revenge was the only obstacle, she hoped that her modest request would this time not be unheeded. The Reverend did not stand the test. A new mortification was inflicted. Her courteous and urgent appeal was again coldly rejected. Then the sorely injured one could no longer be silent, and on January 22d, 1878, she wrote him a final letter, which she closes as follows: "Religion and Humanity, those sacred possessions of the human soul, in whose name I appealed to you, you have grossly outraged. Your conscience will yet awaken when retributive justice causes you as many sleepless, painful nights as your treatment has caused to me, who have ever hitherto experienced from everybody nothing but kindness, friendship and respect. I believe in the Greek legend of the Erinyes, who follow upon the heels of the guilty."

Indeed, the gross injustice cannot remain without its recompense; it has been already avenged. For does there exist a

severer punishment than to carry along as a brand of Cain the heavy burden of a deep transgression? Is there a severer curse than to belong to a sacred calling for which one has no call? To bear continually on the lips words of mildness and forgiveness, to appeal unceasingly to the heart and still be unable to reach or move it! For the power to touch the heart with the magic wand of eloquence only he can wield whose own heart is thrilled with the noble feelings of brotherly love and justice.

These trying and sorrowful days, by the grace of God, passed away and happiness returned, and with new prospects the former joyous tone of our house was restored. A blissful spiritual activity was appreciated by grateful hearts. Thus the dear departed was made happy by seeing her family again prosperous. She alone was not to be permitted to participate in this state of felicity; she, who had been but recently the very picture of blooming health, was now prostrated with severe illness. The healing art, love and friendship, conspired to mitigate her suffering and to revive her hope; but alas! in vain. She did not dread death, for her faith in the immortality of the soul was firm and unshaken. But she hoped for a restoration to health on account of her beloved ones, to whom she was attached with the most touching affection. She took the greatest interest in all the events of life happening in larger or smaller circles; she talked playfully with the children, made plans for the future, hoping to contribute still more to the welfare of humanity. Her and our hopes were doomed to disappointment, for early in the morning of the last day of the year 1878 she breathed her last, after once more her noble eye had gleamed in peculiar splendor as it always did when a grand thought thrilled her soul.

And when we bore her mortal remains to their last resting place, Nature seemed to join in our sad lament and the wind sighed mournfully through the leafless trees, and the storm which in one of her poems she had sung like the Psalmist in strong accords, seemed with its roaring voice as though it would thankfully bid her a last farewell.

I meanwhile thought in silent and submissive sorrow of the time when first we met; when storm and drifting snow stopped

my journey and led me to the hospitality of her parental roof. In the wintry storm I saw her first and in the wintry storm was she taken from my side.

And though death has closed her eyes, so expressive of her soul, and has sealed her lips so rich in song, it cannot rob us of her memory; her image lives in my own heart, in the hearts of her children, and of all her kindred and of many noble men and women. The monument she has erected to herself will not soon become the prey of destroying elements. Her thought will long quicken, and her life long bless! AMEN.